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Hope in troubled times?

PESA and the future of philosophy of education

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Contributors to this special issue have been asked to provide self-portraits of their intellectual lives and to consider the development of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia (PESA) as an organisation. My approach in addressing this task will be to keep the autobiographical details to a minimum and to focus more on the prospects for philosophy of education within contemporary institutions of higher education. Attention will be paid to the New Zealand context and the role PESA has played, and can continue to play, in keeping philosophy of education alive. I shall argue that while the challenges to retaining robust programmes of philosophy of education in university contexts are substantial, there is considerable hope for the future of our field in the work of newer and younger scholars.

My higher education started at the University of Auckland in 1982 and in 1983 I enrolled for the first time in Education papers. This was well before the amalgamations between universities and teachers' colleges that were to occur across New Zealand through the 1990s and 2000s. My interest in Education was as part of a

BA degree. I found my way to the subject by chance rather than careful design but from my initial encounter with one paper in particular, an introduction to Western educational thought, the seeds of lifelong study were sown and I decided to major in Education for my degree. While philosophy of education was principal focus, I also took papers in sociology of education, history of education, and comparative education, among other areas. Colin Lankshear had an especially important influence on my intellectual development but I was also fortunate in being able to study with a number of other excellent scholars, including Jim Marshall, Michael Peters, Gary McCulloch, Eric Braithwaite, Roger Peddie, and Alison Jones. I went on to complete an MA degree at Auckland, with a thesis on Paulo Freire's concept of conscientisation.

In February 1988 I took up my first academic appointment at the University of Waikato. I had tutored on a part-time basis at the University of Auckland but the Waikato position was a full-time Junior Lectureship and I welcomed the opportunity to gain further experience in teaching and research. I was appointed to a Lectureship at Waikato a couple of years later, serving in that role until the end of 1994. I also completed my doctoral degree through Waikato.

I returned to the University of Auckland at the beginning of 1995. The Education Department (as it was then) had arguably the strongest grouping of scholars in critical educational studies in Australasia. The growth in staff numbers in these areas had been facilitated, in part, by the development of a BEd degree and a consequent increase in enrolment income. It was a very vibrant research culture to re-enter, with world leaders in not only philosophy of education but also sociology of education, educational policy studies, indigenous education, and gender and

education, among other domains. I stayed at Auckland for more than 13 years, and witnessed a number of memorable changes during that period.

In April 2008 I took up my current appointment as Professor of Education at the University of Canterbury. As was the case at Auckland and Waikato, I have been privileged here to have had the chance already to get to know a large number of very able and committed teachers and researchers, both within my own School of Educational Studies and Human Development and across the wider College and university.

When I began my career as an academic nearly 22 years ago, New Zealand was on the cusp of a new era in the tertiary education sector. The election of the fourth Labour government in 1984 had marked the arrival of neoliberal economic ideas in the New Zealand context, with the removal of tariffs and subsidies, the sale of state assets, the ‘thinning’ of some bureaucratic structures, and the application of corporate practices in the public sector, among other changes. In 1990 a National government was elected and neoliberalism found its way into almost every pore of New Zealand society. Over the course of the next nine years, with the initial phases in the programme of economic restructuring already complete, policy areas such as health, social welfare and education were subject to a relentless process of neoliberal reform. ‘Choice’ and ‘competition’ became the buzzwords of the decade. Education became a commodity, to be traded in the same way as other goods and services. In universities and other tertiary education institutions, a pervasive culture of performativity emerged. Systems of governance and organisation were modified along managerialist lines. There was a heavy emphasis on marketing and the ‘positioning’ of one institution relative to another.

The formation of a Labour-Alliance coalition government in 1999 ushered in New Zealand's version of Third Way politics. Seeking to distance itself from neoliberal extremes of the past, the new government adopted a central policy motif of advancing New Zealand as a knowledge society and economy. While some important attempts were made during the Labour-led years of 1999-2008 to make New Zealand a fairer and more inclusive society, there was by no means a complete break with the earlier period of neoliberal reform. The commodification of knowledge was pushed in new directions (e.g., with the development of 'export education') and in some senses (e.g., in relation to research funding) competition between institutions increased. Aggressive advertising to retain and build 'market share' continued.

These changes had a significant impact on academic lives and course offerings. In Education, as in other subject areas, an increasing number of decisions were made on the basis of responding to 'market pressures'. BEd degrees, for example, were reduced from four years to three and courses that were deemed to have less obvious 'selling power' were placed under constant threat. It became difficult, in the late 1990s and even more so as the first years of the 21st century unfolded, to sustain well developed programmes of study in philosophy of education from Stage One to Masters. Academics with expertise in philosophy of education and related fields such as sociology of education and history of education were often not replaced and few new positions were created in these areas. We now live in a post-amalgamation environment (Waikato was the first to go down this path, in the early 1990s, and over the next fifteen years or so, the other universities have followed suit), and the total number of academics in Education in universities has swelled enormously, but philosophers of education make up only a very small fraction of that academic population.

While these have been undeniably difficult times for philosophy of education (and the New Zealand experience is not unique in this regard), there are some notable rays of hope. PESA has been there throughout the neoliberal era. The organisation has struggled at different times over the past two decades, but in more recent years the conferences have been highly successful and the Society's journal, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, has gone from strength to strength. One of the most positive features of the conference gatherings has been the inclusion of a growing number of able and energetic doctoral students. This is, to a significant degree, where the future of the Society and philosophy of education as a field of inquiry lies.

We should, in my view, continue to argue for specialist appointments and courses in philosophy of education. But where we cannot win these battles, it is still possible for worthwhile philosophical work in Education to go on. Courses of a more generic 'social foundations' kind can, under the right circumstances, enable students to develop philosophical competence and acquire an understanding of some of the key thinkers and ideas in our field. Courses of that kind are themselves often under threat and this can make it very difficult to prepare students adequately for more advanced work. This does not, to my way of thinking, mean the few of us who remain should give up and simply try to hold on to our own positions until retirement. We must, I believe, work with what we have while also struggling, in our different ways, to change the situation.

Any student currently completing a doctorate in Education with a philosophical focus would, in my view, be well advised to keep his or her options as open as possible. Positions in philosophy of education may be extremely rare but philosophical skills and knowledge can sometimes be applied in other domains that do appear more frequently in university job advertisements. Such areas include, for

example, 'teacher education' (this is often poorly defined), curriculum studies, pedagogy, and research methodology. The term 'policy' also sometimes finds its way into position advertisements and can provide a helpful avenue for philosophical work.

Philosophy of education is, in some respects, at odds with the spirit of the times. We are so often encouraged to seek 'quick fix', easy answers to what should be regarded as complex, difficult educational problems and questions. When finances are tight, technocratic and managerialist forms of thought sometimes tend to prevail. One of the ways PESA might continue building on its successes of recent years would be to become more active and visible as an organisation in commenting on policy developments, at both a national and an international level. I have gained much from the colleagues and students with whom I have worked over the past 22 years. PESA has been an important part of this experience. I am hopeful that 22 years further down the line, we will still have PESA conferences, with many of the current newer and younger members helping to provide a rigorous and supportive environment for continuing philosophical discussion.